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CO-TEACHING, CO-LEADING, CO-LEARNING: REFLECTION ON THE CO-TEACHING MODEL IN PRACTICUM

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Introduction

Student teaching practicum is a period in which candidates transition from being students (pre-service credential candidates) to becoming beginning teachers. Ideally this induction into the teaching profession occurs through mentorship and collaboration between university supervisors (USs) and school-site cooperating teachers (CTs). However, all too often, the voices and experiences of teacher candidates (TCs) themselves are left out of the discourse surrounding student teaching and sometimes omitted from the process altogether. Traditional student teaching models often leave TC experiences to chance, with some experiencing strong mentorship while others are flung immediately into instructional roles, to “sink or swim” in the classroom (Badiali & Titus, 2009). In traditional models of student teaching, the growing responsibilities of TCs in the classroom (from planning to instruction and assessment) are unclearly articulated; such ambiguity presents challenges: for TCs to exert professional agency, for USs to advocate for them, and for CTs to effectively mentor them.

The co-teaching model shifts from a traditional student teaching practicum to a paradigm of active collaboration, ongoing professional learning, and shared leadership during practicum (Bacharach, Heck & Dahlberg, 2008b). In clearly defining the responsibility of all three parties in the practicum triad (CTs, TCs, and USs), co-teaching allows for a mutual understanding of each member’s roles and responsibilities. Co-teaching requires: TCs to take an active role from the beginning of practicum in co-planning and co-instructing; CTs to engage in active mentorship and make the thinking behind their practices explicit; and USs to support and encourage the ongoing collaboration and professional discourse between TCs and CTs throughout the practicum period. Co-teaching provides TCs opportunities to develop their emergent professional identities and practices under the guidance of a mentor; it also offers CTs opportunities for increased professional discourse, reflection in practice, new perspectives on practice and flexibility in instruction. However, the process requires willingness of all members to move away from a less-defined structure of traditional practicum to a lens of critical reflection.

The authors of this paper are two university faculty members at a large, urban university teaching core courses in the preliminary credential programs. Our university is part of the 23-campus California State University system responsible for preparing one of the largest number of teacher credential candidates. When our department credential program adopted a co-teaching model of practicum, we sought to understand how this change might impact credential candidates enrolled in our courses and those we were supervising.

In fall 2012, both of us took on a university supervisory role, and were responsible for a total of 9 multiple subject credential program (MSCP) teacher candidates. Each TC had a primary (K-2) and upper elementary (3-6) placement at two separate demographically diverse sites within the same K-8 district in Southern California. The supervisory role provided a context for this

reflective piece, allowing us to examine the nuances of co-teaching (both in our own joint seminar classroom and in those classrooms in which TCs were placed), to assess the benefits and challenges of co-teaching in practicum, and to make recommendations to strengthen the implementation of co-teaching on a programmatic level.

The aim in this paper is to highlight the experiences and voices of our TCs who engaged in practicum in the first semester of program-wide co-teaching implementation, as well as discuss our own learning with regard to listening to the reflections of our TCs; engaging in classroom observations and informal conversations; and facilitating prompt-based reflections and seminar sessions. The co-teaching model with core components and strategies seemed clearly articulated in the literature and stated in our supporting materials. However, TCs' thoughts and our experiences reflected both the overall benefits of the model but also the difficulties of consistent co-teaching implementation in the classroom without a clear and agreed upon understanding of the model by all practicum members. We conclude the paper by reflecting upon our experiences as faculty and university supervisors and making recommendations that support future members of the practicum triad and their continuous development.

Key Elements of Practice in Co-Teaching

Bacharach and her colleagues (2008a) also discuss seven strategies, or models, of co-teaching. For the purpose of this paper, we condensed these models into four approaches to co-teaching: *supportive*, *parallel*, *complementary*, and *team co-teaching* (California State University Long Beach Multiple Subject Credential Program, 2012). *Supportive co-teaching* is defined as one teacher taking a lead instructional role while the second teacher supports instruction by rotating, providing one-to-one tutorial assistance or assessing as the other co-teacher directs the lesson. *Parallel co-teaching* involves both co-teaching partners working with different groups of students in different sections of the room. In this model, each co-teacher eventually works with each student in the class, through rotation or shifting groups over time. In *complementary co-teaching*, one co-teacher enhances the instruction provided by the other co-teacher (i.e. one teacher paraphrasing the other co-teacher's statements or modeling note taking skills during the other co-teacher's instruction). Finally, *team co-teaching* involves the simultaneous instruction of both co-teachers where both co-teachers must be comfortable with taking the lead and supporting throughout the lesson based on their particular strengths and knowledge base. In team co-teaching, it is essential that both co-teachers are viewed as equally knowledgeable and credible.

Learning from Our Candidates' Co-Teaching Experiences

Theme 1: Co-Teaching Scaffold and Support for Teacher Candidates

When prompted to give their thoughts about the co-teaching model, all the TC participants responded positively. Several respondents stated that co-teaching was a powerful practicum model that offered benefits that could strongly support their growth and the practicum experience for future TCs. As one TC, Kelly, noted:

I only have positive things to say about my experiences with the co-teaching model. From what I understand, in the past, student teachers relied on their master teacher to decide when and how they were going to take over the teaching in their classroom. The co-teaching model seems like a much more comprehensive and detailed outline of how to introduce student teachers into the teaching role, allowing the cooperating teacher to provide the proper amount of support (very much like the “scaffolding” we are all familiar with). I feel that the co-teaching model benefits and supports the student teacher. Both of my cooperating teachers had nothing but positive things to say about the co-teaching model, and preferred it to the old way of doing things.

Sarah, a second TC, responded, “I liked the co-teaching model. I felt that as someone coming in who has never been in charge of a class that it provided a lot of scaffolding and support.” Similarly, Jessica stated that, “the co-teaching model, especially at first, helped me to ‘get my feet wet’ slowly, but [my CT] also gave me room to step up and teach.” Finally, EJ noted that co-teaching allowed her to build upon her previous experiences and work in partnership with her CT. EJ also highlighted co-planning as facilitating a smooth transition into co-instruction during class.

In referencing their experiences with co-teaching as a model, each of these TCs spoke to the gradual, but well-articulated, transition into her classroom role as a co-teacher. Several of them also noted that the model provided scaffolding where necessary, but also allowed them to feel involved in the classroom from the first day, particularly in their first placements when they were introduced as a second teacher in the classroom from the first day of school. In these first placements, TCs began engaging in *complementary* and *supportive* co-teaching (in which they assisted small groups of students or drifted to check for understanding) almost immediately and even helped their co-teachers facilitate some of the initial classroom expectations activities for the school year. Finally, co-teaching allowed TCs to bring their own experiences to the table, particularly through co-planning, that led to a sense of empowerment during co-taught lessons.

Co-planning was especially evident in cases where CTs were engaging in shifting practices around their own instruction, with either a new subject preparation (e.g. planning to teach a new rotation in an English Language Development cycle) and/or integrating new strategies in response to larger initiatives (e.g. a shift to integrating greater language scaffolding to support the implementation of the Common Core State Standards). In these cases, CTs were also coming to the curriculum with a new lens and more flexibility, allowing both teachers (TC and CT) to co-construct material in a more equitable manner.

Theme 2: Importance of Cooperating Teacher’s Role in Co-Teaching Experience

Another theme emerging from the respondents’ discussions of their co-teaching experiences was the critical role the CT played in the implementation process of the co-teaching model. Several of the TCs spoke of stark differences between their two placements based on the CTs’ “willingness to participate” in the co-teaching model. For instance, a CT agreed to try new ideas or other pedagogic approaches she had not yet implemented in her practice. In two cases, positive first placements with CTs engaging actively with TCs and scaffolding their experience according to the co-teaching models were then followed by second placements in which one TC (Sarah) perceived that her CT “rejected the model and refused to follow it” and the other TC (Jessica) stated that “co-teaching was not as readily accepted and utilized to its advantage.” The

contrasting experiences led the Jessica to note that, “the co-teaching model works only if the master teacher understands it and is willing to make it a part of their time with the student teacher.”

In both cases where TCs felt their CTs were unwilling to engage in the co-teaching model, CTs stated expertise and credentials (e.g. as District teacher of the year, having a dual single-subject credential in mathematics, etc.) to us in observation meetings where we attempted to voice the concerns of the TCs, perhaps to lend credibility to their classroom expertise and the strength of their practice. These CTs focused on their own expertise and experience rather than the mentorship of their TCs and the importance of shared leadership in the classroom. Sarah’s CT was also dismissive at our initial meeting (an introduction to co-teaching), explaining the way that she always initiated student teachers and that she had done it this way for years successfully and placing any lack of success on Sarah, herself. While she stated a willingness to collaborate, co-plan and share materials, an early classroom incident led Sarah to feel that her CT did not respect her as a professional; in planning meetings, she felt the CT talked down to her and assumed that she had no strategies of her own to bring to the table. This was consistent with the “helper” label assigned to some TCs which tends to signal lower status coupled with a diminished level of respect and authority in the eyes of the CT and her students (Nguyen, 2009). Having come from a first placement in which she was actively co-teaching and highly respected by her CT, this sense of her own status as “lesser than” in her second placement greatly affected Sarah’s professional identity, causing her to doubt her own competency and struggle more as she was given greater responsibilities in the classroom.

Another TC (Kim) had a different experience in which co-teaching was implemented to some degree in both placements; however that degree depended upon the individual CT’s comfort with the curriculum and learning environment (also with her presumably “new” role as co-teacher). In Kim’s first placement, the full co-teaching model (including the co-planning aspect) only occurred when the CT was given a completely new group for ELL rotations (English Only students) for whom no ELD curriculum (and also absence of differentiated instruction) was provided. This led her to note, “Since we [my CT and I] were on our own for curriculum and material, it presented a unique opportunity for us to work together from brainstorming to assessment. Unfortunately this only lasted for the last few weeks during the first placement.” In her second placement, Kim spoke of two different experiences with co-teaching, the first with science rotations in which part of the class left (reducing the number of students) and the CT had a strong sense of expertise and the second with math rotations in which another class came in to learn (increasing the number of students) and the CT had “reservations about students learning in that environment.” Of this second experience, Kim stated: “I could tell it was hard for her to release that class time, and so our co-teaching often turned into her re-teaching concepts I had just given instruction on.” Although this CT likely did not mean to disrespect Kim’s ability to teach, her concerns about students’ difficulty with mathematical concepts in an over-crowded environment led Kim to feel as if her instruction was dismissed as an introduction to concepts that would be retaught by the CT.

In these examples, the TCs perceived that the CT’s attitudes towards either the co-teaching model or the curriculum itself determined their experiences with the co-teaching model. Because all TCs had two placements, they were able to compare and reflect upon the consistent or

contrasting co-teaching experiences in both placements. However, even TCs that had positive experiences with the co-teaching model in their first placement were acutely aware of their “place” in their CT classrooms (Nguyen, 2008) and could not assert a co-teacher “partnering” stance without the willing participation of their CTs. As USs, we were essentially “visitors” in the CTs’ classrooms. Our once-a-week presence in these settings limited our capacity to advocate for our TCs’ levels of implementation of the co-teaching model, particularly when the CTs and TCs differed in perspective and when there was inconsistent understanding of co-teaching. This incongruence in perception between CTs, TCs and USs may have been because of disparate understandings of the model itself or, as the TCs attributed to their CTs, a lesser or greater willingness to implement the model.

Theme 3: Systematic Infrastructure to Support Co-Teaching

In their reflections on their practicum experiences, two of the TC respondents spoke strongly about the need for systematic support for co-teaching to ensure its effective implementation. For Kim, systematic support came from fostering TC-CT relationships over time. She recommended that this model might be more appropriately implemented in a yearlong practicum with a single CT in order to allow for a TC and CT to “productively feed off one another.” We interpret this statement to mean that a TC and CT would better be able to build trust and develop a common vision of teaching and learning, set of pedagogical skills, and complementary teaching styles during this mini-apprenticeship period (Lortie, 2002). Given the short length of each placement (8 weeks), CTs who may have had reservations regarding either the model or their own curriculum may not have had enough time to establish the trust necessary to fully implement a co-teaching practicum. Furthermore, given current accountability demands, CTs may have felt nervous about giving extensive time to a TC co-teacher that might affect student achievement results later on standardized testing benchmarks.

Jessica noted that CTs and placement schools needed a more systematic training in order to effectively implement that co-teaching model of practicum rather than “just the brief overview they were given from the first meeting with the supervisor and student teacher.” She also noted the importance of regular feedback regarding the model and how it was working or not working during the course of the placement, as part of the CT dual co-teacher and mentor role (Nguyen, 2009). Explicit discussion in the model about the nature of feedback appropriate during co-planning or supervisory meetings might help reduce “gossip” or discussion of personalities and help focus conversations on professional growth and development. In order for this type of regular feedback to occur, again, there would need to be a sufficient level of trust, collaboration and mutual respect to support open and honest feedback among all practicum members. Furthermore, all parties must come into a co-teaching practicum with clearly articulated expectations that would allow for greater buy-in to the model. Teacher Candidates must be aware of and commit to the time demand required to co-plan with their CTs while CTs must embrace a more active, responsive and present role throughout the practicum to support their TCs’ personal and professional success.

Learning from Our Co-Teaching Experiences in Facilitating Practicum Seminar

In addition to our role as USs, we also co-taught our practicum courses as models for our TCs. Our collaboration afforded us valuable opportunities for examining the complexities of co-teaching which helped us to thoughtfully frame concerns our TCs had encountered in their own co-teaching experiences. In their work on co-teaching in a higher education context, Ferguson and Wilson (2011) discuss an initial self-consciousness and desire to prove oneself to her colleague in approaching the co-teaching classroom that eventually evolved into a shared, collaborative focus on learning. In their case, Ferguson and Wilson presented their mutual concern and shared self-consciousness without a discussion of participants coming from different levels of expertise. In our case, given that it was Betina's initial semester as faculty and her introduction to supervising credential candidates, she initially felt both grateful and somewhat intimidated to be working with Huong, a former National Teacher of the Year and seasoned faculty member. While Betina brought her own years of K-12 classroom and professional experiences and the value of having just come from the K-12 setting prior to entering the university, without Huong's validation and view of her as an equal partner in the co-teaching process, she likely would have deferred to Huong's expertise and taken a backseat in the co-planning and co-teaching process, despite her belief in the model. From the beginning, Huong's respect for Betina's practice and knowledge as well as Huong's willingness to share ideas while exploring new perspectives allowed for equitable participation in the co-planning and co-teaching process.

In coordinating seminars, each of us initially took a lead role in planning particular sessions within an agreed upon framework to guide our instruction. Then, prior to each seminar, we would meet, discuss the session and the co-instructor would give feedback to the lead instructor for that session. Generally, Huong helped ground Betina's thinking in theoretical perspectives and more global frameworks while Betina helped integrate inquiry and engagement based activities into each seminar, each co-teacher drawing from her own strengths and experiences to develop stronger collective instruction for their shared group of TCs. During the seminars, we would then engage mainly in *supportive co-teaching* for the instructional portion of the course, followed by *parallel co-teaching* with each of our respective groups of TCs. At each of our planning meetings, we would begin by debriefing our prior session and our prior week's observations in order to make any necessary adjustment based on those experiences to our upcoming seminar sessions.

In many ways, our collaborative relationship demonstrated an ideal co-teaching partnership. While she was the less experienced co-teacher, Betina still came to the partnership with confidence, professional competence, an emergent but clear sense of professional identity as a teacher educator, and a willingness to invest the time necessary to co-plan and co-facilitate courses. As the more experienced co-teacher, Huong brought years of faculty experience, but also approached the collaboration as a chance to gain fresh perspectives and with flexibility in relation to the scope and instructional practices to be used during seminar. Huong also was aware of the time commitment and active mentoring role that she would play in the partnership. Having received the same training for co-teaching, both Betina and Huong entered into this partnership freely, and recognized the benefits for themselves and their students as worthy of additional time investment spent to ensure success for all.

In retrospect, we realized that there were both similarities and differences in our co-teaching situation and those of the TCs and CTs with whom we worked. The differing power dynamics between a junior pre-tenured and a senior tenured faculty member mirrored that of a differing power dynamic between our TCs and their CTs. In our case, Huong's professional dispositions towards Betina mitigated much of this power dynamic, leading to a strongly collaborative and complementary working relationship. Similarly, in cases where CTs treated their TCs as fellow professionals with important contributions to the classroom, co-teaching partnerships were more successful for both co-teachers. However, in placements where TCs felt belittled or dismissed by the CTs (even when CTs expressed a positive view towards co-teaching), the unsafe and hostile environment did not support such collaboration, leading to less-than-rewarding placements.

Additionally, we realized through our partnership the shared constraint of time that we shared with our CTs and TCs. Successful collaboration between USs and co-teaching partnerships among CTs and TCs requires designated time built into planning schedules, which was a shared constraint by all parties. In addition to our co-facilitated seminar, both Huong and Betina taught a full course load and had their individual supervisory duties. In addition to mentoring TCs, CTs had other personal and professional obligations (site and district committee work, teaching, supervision, etc.). In addition to their student teaching, many TCs also worked part time and had personal responsibilities. This premium on time made it difficult to focus on co-teaching without a strong commitment to the model. In our cases, bi-weekly seminars necessitated time blocks in between sessions to meet, co-plan and reflect; this time was an additional, uncompensated demand on our time. Our co-teaching experience put in perspective time-related concerns brought forth by CTs and TCs, which helped to explain instances when co-teaching relationships were not as strong as they could have been despite support expressed by both the TC and CT partners.

Furthermore, while all of the TCs and most of the CTs expressed a favorable opinion of the model (as they understood it), neither group was given a choice to participate in a co-teaching based practicum. The Multiple Subject Credential Program piloted co-teaching as a practicum methodology without informing TCs of this change in advance of their student teaching placement; and CTs were not informed about the co-teaching pilot until their initial introduction to the model through their TCs and the initial supervision meeting. TCs' and CTs' required participation in this model (with little prior knowledge and training) likely attributed to their differing levels of investment in implementation as well as their differing understandings of the requirements of the model. It also may have led to misunderstandings and miscommunications as some TCs expected to co-facilitate instruction, without fully grasping the time commitment required to co-plan. In some instances, CTs expected TCs to either immediately take full control of the classroom or to remain as an assistant throughout the semester in ways that resembled more traditional forms of practicum.

Finally, we recognized that we had great flexibility in designing our practicum seminar in a way that best supported our students than the TCs and CTs with whom we worked. We used the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and California Department of Education, 1997) as a joint framework for our seminar and drew upon our individual contributions in constructing each course session.

Conversely, CTs had to negotiate new demands placed on them by the district to integrate Common Core aligned practices (and in some cases GATE aligned depth and complexity strategies) into their instruction, and TCs felt pressured to teach the units aligned with district pacing guides. The added constraint and pressure of district curriculum mandates may have minimized opportunities for negotiation among CTs and TCs during planning and instruction, making true collaboration more difficult.

Reflections and Recommendations

Working with one another and our TCs enriched our perspectives of co-teaching principles and enactment in the local contexts with district partners. We attribute the success of our professional collaboration (i.e., co-teaching the practicum seminar, co-planning credential courses and co-authoring for publication) to our mutual respect for one another as instructors and scholars in choosing to engage in this type of collaborative work. Our relationship could have gone very differently if Huong (as senior faculty member) had a view of mentorship that was based upon imparting knowledge and experience to Betina, rather than a collaborative approach drawing upon both our experiences. It would also have been different if Betina had not felt able to assert her own thoughts and expertise into our shared work. However, even in these situations, either of us could have been free to our collaboration and return to independent academic life. Ultimately, our collaborative inquiry reinforced our commitment for continued joint work, freeing us from our isolated silos.

Given that TCs must participate in practicum to obtain their credential (and often rely on CTs for letters of recommendation), it is essential that the choice of CTs be intentional, based on experience, qualifications, *and* dispositional qualities including a desire to engage in active mentorship, partnership, and reflection. Teacher candidates must also be keen to develop their own professional identities and find their voices to become active contributors and participants in the classroom. We are aware, nonetheless, that CTs' attitudes and positioning towards their TCs often influences TCs comfort in expressing their own thoughts and forging their emergent professional identities. We agree with our TCs that these types of mutually respectful and professionally collaborative relationships must be fostered over time and recommend early introduction of TCs to their prospective CTs, perhaps through initial fieldwork observations (during credentialing coursework classes) leading to a two-semester co-teaching practicum.

Our second recommendation is for universities and departments to lend institutional support for co-teaching and encourage faculty (within and across disciplines) to conduct collaborative work. This type of work requires considerable structured time for planning, dialogue, enactment and reflection, thus promoting not only faculty members' personal and pedagogic development but also the institution as a whole. In addition to promoting professional growth, investing in co-teaching would also benefit TCs as students and the K-12 students in co-taught settings. Our TCs' reflections regularly emphasized the importance of a mutual understanding of co-teaching on the part of their CTs. This cannot happen without greater investment in training CTs in the model, strategies and core components of co-teaching. University faculty and supervisors also need to understand, experience and engage in co-teaching to have full knowledge of the complex nature of this construct. We must caution any interested parties of the significant investment of time required of participants while being mindful of the K-12 era of accountability and in a

highly competitive academic environment. Without opportunities to learn about co-teaching and allowances for the additional time needed to co-plan, collaborate and reflect, there is little incentive for CTs and university faculty to implement a co-teaching model. Rather, there are increasing pressures to remain efficient, isolated and focused on “what works” instead of critically reflecting on why practices work and how they can be improved. Without institutional support, ongoing and effective co-teaching is not possible.

As educators, we believe that we must listen to one another and to our students if we are to build authentic teaching and learning partnerships. We must also articulate our individual perspectives about co-teaching principles and begin to think more deeply about its enactment in the classroom. With our K-12 CT partners, practicum offers a unique and important space of shared mentorship. If we are able to capitalize on the promise of the co-teaching model of practicum, we will create rippled effects of teaching and learning together that will benefit K-12 and Higher Education/ Teacher Education communities alike.

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